

# **The Universality of Mythology**

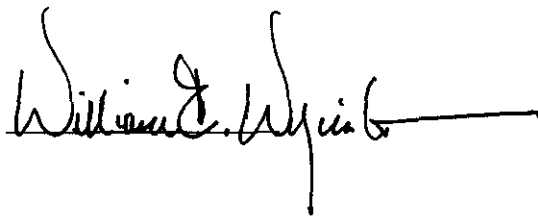
## **As Seen Through Cuchulainn**

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "William Wycislo", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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## Abstract

Mythology and Ireland have always fascinated me, so for this project I chose to research Celtic mythology. I quickly found that mythologies around the world hold many similarities, in types, patterns, and characters. Specifically, this paper examines how one Celtic mythology hero, Cuchulainn, follows the common pattern found in hero myths. It holds explanations of several types of myths and examples of the hero's pattern. It also includes brief discussions of the Celtic society in which the stories take place. The information incorporated into this work has been collected from research venues, myth and folklore publications, personal travel experiences, and multiple classes concerning the subject. The information about Cuchulainn is largely presented in a story-telling format in order to capture the essence of the mythology.

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## Introduction

The American Heritage Dictionary defines myth as “a traditional, typically ancient story dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes that serve as a primordial type in the world view of a people.”<sup>1</sup> Oxford American Dictionary refers to it as “a traditional narrative usually involving supernatural or imaginary persons and embodying popular ideas on natural or social phenomena; a widely held, but false notion.”<sup>2</sup> *Classical Mythology* states that “true myth or myth proper is ultimately, ‘the result of the working of naïve imagination upon the facts of experience.’”<sup>3</sup> “Levi-Strauss sees myth as a mode of communication, like language or music.”<sup>4</sup> According to Lewis Spence, “myth...is, in the strict sense of the term, the description of a rite, its story, the narrative linked with it.”<sup>5</sup>

From these views, one can see that “no single theory of myth can cover all myths.”<sup>6</sup> This is because “myth is a many-faceted personal and cultural phenomenon created to provide a reality and a unity to what is transitory and fragmented in the world that we experience.”<sup>7</sup> Myths serve various functions, provide masses of explanations, and teach countless lessons for cultures that desire to have their often confusing, disorderly existence wrapped up into an entertaining story of the world’s history, their lineage, or a justification of events. Perhaps it is for this reason that myths are found in

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<sup>1</sup> Marjorie Berube, ed., *American Heritage Dictionary* (New York: Dell, 2001) 562.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Abate, ed., *The Oxford American Dictionary and Language Guide* (New York: Oxford, 1999) 654.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Morford and Robert Lenardon, *Classical Mythology: Fourth Ed.* (New York; Longman, 1991) 2.

<sup>4</sup> Morford, *Classical Mythology*, 13.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis Spence, *Outlines of Mythology* (New York: Fawcett, 1961) 15.

<sup>6</sup> Morford, *Classical Mythology*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Morford, *Classical Mythology*, 7.

every culture in the world. Furthermore, though the variations are innumerable, myths can be classified into certain, similar categories that exist in every culture.

One of these types is hero myths, the majority of which follow a common pattern. The Celtic mythology hero Cuchulainn, as we will see, finds many parallels to this pattern. This work will, largely through the recounting of the most famous of Cuchulainn's stories, show threads of the previous examples of the pattern within one hero's life. Through the similarities of the types of myths worldwide, of hero myths and their pattern, and of Cuchulainn and other heroes compared to that pattern, one can see the universality of mythology.

## Types of Myths

"Nearly all mythologies resemble each other in the general structure and the character of their personnel."<sup>8</sup> Mythology as a discipline can be categorized into basic types of myths found in nearly all societies. These types include, but are not limited to, myths "which deal with the creation of the world, with the origin of man, which treat of the heavenly bodies, of places of reward and punishment, and most important of all, perhaps, of the adventures of gods."<sup>9</sup> Flood myths, afterlife myths, underworld myths, constellation myths, and hero myths are also commonly found, each serving different purposes for humanity. Some myths attempt to explain to an unscientific culture a scientific phenomenon; others teach the origin of traditions and rituals, while yet others hold moral values and lessons for a particular society.

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<sup>8</sup> Spence, *Outlines of Mythology*, 91.

<sup>9</sup> Spence, *Outlines of Mythology*, 63.

Every culture has a creation myth that explains the origin of the world, and according to Spence, “the general resemblance between most creation myths is very striking.”<sup>10</sup> This category contains theories of creation such as the Mother Earth/Father Sky, Chaos, Omnipotent Creator, and Cosmic Egg theories, among others. Some combine these theories, such as the Japanese creation myth. This myth tells that the in the beginning, the universe was all chaos, and out of that the gods were born, two of which, Izanami and Izanagi, created the earth.<sup>11</sup> Creation myths serve as an example of phenomenon explanation, as do flood myths.

Flood myths are not unique to Noah and the Middle East, but are “known to nearly all the races of humanity.”<sup>12</sup> Often, only one man, couple, or immediate family is left to repopulate the earth. The Chippewa Native American legend claims that when the land was flooded, the medicine-man Wis-kay-tchach built a raft for himself and the animals that could not swim long, and then he sent four different animals down into the water to find land. The last one, a rat, brought back with him a bit of dirt, which Wis-kay-tchach used to recreate the earth.<sup>13</sup> With causes for the flood and types and numbers of the animals differing, this story can be found in numerous variations within Native American myths. Wis-kay-tchach is not simply the central character in this tale, but also serves as its hero.

A hero myth usually focuses on one character that performs an act that requires bravery and strength. Hero myths can function as a social standard, venerating the

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<sup>10</sup> Spence, *Outlines*, 67.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Brians, “Japanese Creation Myth.” [http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~wldciv/world\\_civ\\_reader/world\\_civ\\_reader\\_1/kojiki.html](http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~wldciv/world_civ_reader/world_civ_reader_1/kojiki.html). 5 April 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Spence, *Outlines of Mythology*, 77.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Isaak, “Flood Stories from around the World.” <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/flood/myths.html#Timagami>. 5 April 2005.

heroes' actions, decisions, and final success. "The idiosyncrasies of each hero simply reflect the particular view of heroism of each society."<sup>14</sup> Whether the hero employs patience or brute strength, for example, shows the values of his culture. While the hero may represent what people should strive to be, they often do not live up to the example he sets. According to Robert Segal, the majority of people are content to live ordinary lives within "indicated bounds" and admire the hero from a distance.<sup>15</sup> "The hero is heroic exactly because he does what everyone else either will not or cannot do" and because "he does it on the behalf of everyone else as well as himself."<sup>16</sup> Spence states that "Lord Raglan has made it plain that the "life-history" of such demi-gods or heroes is capable of being reduced to a formula."<sup>17</sup> The life of heroes, from conception to death, often follows some amalgamation of the ensuing patterns.

## Patterns in Hero Myths

In the same way that mythologies around the world possess similarities, they can also be found in each type of myth. The majority of hero myths follow a pattern, or at least contain many of the same elements. Below are examples of four different writers and their outlines of the life of a hero.

In 1871, anthropologist Edward Tylor listed the following basic parallels<sup>18</sup>:

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Segal, *Joseph Campbell: An Introduction* (New York: Garland, 1987) 5.

<sup>15</sup> Segal, *Joseph Campbell*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Segal, *Joseph Campbell*, 4-5.

<sup>17</sup> Spence, *Outlines*, 86.

<sup>18</sup> Segal, *Joseph Campbell*, 1.



- 1) The hero is exposed at birth;
- 2) Saved and raised by other humans or animals; and
- 3) Grows up to become a national hero.

Writing more extensively, Johann Georg van Hahn compared fourteen “Aryan” hero tales to deduce this pattern in 1876<sup>19</sup>:

- 1) The hero is born illegitimately;
- 2) A prophecy is made, which causes the fearful father to abandon the child;
- 3) The hero is saved by animals;
- 4) Raised by a lowly couple;
- 5) Fights wars; returns triumphant;
- 6) Defeats his persecutors;
- 7) Frees his mother;
- 8) Becomes king;
- 9) Founds cities; and
- 10) Dies young.

According to Freudian student and psychologist Otto Rank in 1922, the model is as follows<sup>20</sup>:

- 1) The hero is born to distinguished parents after some difficulties due to sexual abstinence, secret intercourse, a prophecy, et cetera;
- 2) Left to die, often surrendered to water;

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<sup>19</sup> Spence, *Outlines of Mythology*, 1.

<sup>20</sup> Otto Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* (New York: John Hopkins University, 2004) 47.

- 3) Saved and raised by animals or lowly people;
- 4) Finds parents;
- 5) Takes revenge; and
- 6) Achieves greatness and fame.

Lewis Spence states, in 1961, the following points for the typical hero's life<sup>21</sup>:

- 1) The hero has a royal maiden and a king for parents, but is said to be the son of a god;
- 2) Circumstances of his birth are unusual or obscure;
- 3) An attempt at murder is made, but he is spirited away and raised by foster-parents;
- 4) Hero returns;
- 5) Defeats king (or monster);
- 6) Marries princess;
- 7) Becomes king;
- 8) Reigns uneventfully;
- 9) Loses favor with the gods;
- 10) Meets mysterious death, often on a hillside;
- 11) Body is not buried, but is rumored to have tombs in several locations.

In addition to these criteria, the hero figure is often associated with supernatural abilities, faced with impossible feats at an exceptionally young age, and connected with prophecies later in life. While it is undeniable that these patterns apply to most hero

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<sup>21</sup> Spence, *Outlines of Mythology*, 86.

myths, not all heroes conform to every rule. Some pick up pieces of the pattern, or can relate to certain phases in various ways without adhering to it exactly. In Celtic mythology, the hero Cuchulainn dominates the tales told of ancient Ireland, and we will examine selected episodes from his life and where his tales do or do not fit the pattern.

## Introduction to Cuchulainn

The Ulster, or Red Branch, Cycle “is the great heroic cycle of Irish mythology.”<sup>22</sup> It takes place approximately during the time of Christ, and the first written records date back to the seventh century, but the tales hold an oral tradition of centuries earlier.<sup>23</sup> “The Ulster Cycle comprises more than a hundred highly miscellaneous tales,” but also holds the “greatest of the Irish epics – the Táin Bo Cuailnge,” which will be briefly addressed.<sup>24</sup> This cycle focuses on the people of the province of Ulster and the warriors of the Red Branch, a band of men who serve to protect their land and their king, Conchubar mac Nessa. The main hero of the cycle is Cuchulainn, who is often referred to as the Irish Hercules for several reasons, which we will encounter. “Cuchulainn has no peer, and the part assigned to him...reflects faithfully enough his role throughout the cycle: he is the invincible hero to whom fate ordains a short life with lasting glory.”<sup>25</sup> Though he often steps outside the routine, in many ways Cuchulainn follows the pattern

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<sup>22</sup> Peter Berresford Ellis, *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, (New York: Oxford, 1992) 185.

<sup>23</sup> Proinsias MacCana, *Celtic Mythology* (London: Hamlyn, 1970) 97.

<sup>24</sup> George Brandon Saul, *Traditional Irish Literature and Its Backgrounds: A Brief Introduction* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University, 1970) 77.

<sup>25</sup> MacCana, *Celtic Mythology*, 101.

of hero myths. As we will see, the myth of Cuchulainn does include many of these elements, though not all, and often in a different order.

## **Birth of Cuchulainn**

Cuchulainn's birth follows the first stage in the pattern of hero myths: noble parentage. Some controversy exists as to the identity of Cuchulainn's true parents. His mother, Dechtire, was half-sister to the king, Conchobar mac Nessa. While most versions of the story claim that his father was the god Lugh of the Long Hand, many sources state that Conchobar himself was reputed to be the father. It is generally accepted, though, that Lugh is the hero's father.

Dechtire was celebrating her engagement to Sualtim mac Roig the night before her wedding when a mayfly flew into her drink unnoticed. She took a drink, swallowing the mayfly. That night, Dechtire had a dream in which Lugh came to her and explained that he had taken the shape of the mayfly and that she and her fifty maidens must come away with him. Lugh gave them the appearance of birds, and they flew away and were missing from the castle for almost a year.

Conchobar searched for his sister until one day a flock of birds was spotted. Conchobar gathered his warriors for a hunt and pursued the flock until nightfall when they were forced to stop and look for shelter. Fergus first found a small, humble house with a man and woman inside who welcomed him and invited the warriors for the night. But when Fergus returned and told what he had seen, Bricriu Poison-Tongue said it was of no use to go there when they could not all fit or be fed. He went himself in search of

shelter and, in the same place, found a grand house with a handsome man in armor and a noble young woman. The man welcomed Bricriu. When the woman did the same, Bricriu questioned why she would do this. The man told him it was on her behalf that he welcomed Bricriu and asked him if any one was missing from Emain Macha. Bricriu told him of the fifty maidens. The man asked Bricriu if he would not recognize these women, and Bricriu replied he would, unless the year had changed their appearances.

The man revealed his identity as Lugh and the woman next to him as Dechtire herself, and said that her maidens were within the house. Lugh invited Bricriu to bring the warriors to the house for the night. He left to do so, but decided not to tell them about the women yet. When all the warriors arrived, Conchobar desired to meet the lady of the house and offer his thanks for her hospitality, but the man, for he did not introduce himself as Lugh, informed him that she was in the pains of labor.

During the night, Conchobar was awakened by crying and went in search of the source. He found his own sister in bed with a child and surrounded by her fifty maidens. Dechtire welcomed him and told him that she had him led to this place to take her back to Emain Macha. Conchobar suggested that their sister Finchoem raise the child. Many of the king's best men objected, each claiming that they were most qualified to raise the boy. To settle the dispute, Conchobar brought them all to Morann, the judge, who declared that all of them would tutor the boy, each in his area of expertise, once he grew old enough. Dechtire and Sualtim were married and the boy lived with them, known as Setanta, son of Sualtim.

In this story, not only is the first aspect of hero myths evident, but also traces of several others. Certainly, we must consider who his parents are – this alone foreshadows

his greatness. Cuchulainn is the son of a noble woman, nephew and foster-son to the king, and reputed son of a god, fulfilling Spence's first point. The Greek hero Hercules was also half-man/half-god as he was born to the godly Zeus and a human mother, Alcmena. In Lugh's abduction of Dechtire we find a complication of birth and Setanta was brought into the world mysteriously, both of which points support Rank's difficulty requirement and Spence's mention of an unusual birth.

Next, the child was abandoned by his biological father, a theme throughout all of the patterns. Lugh sends him with humans, deserting him. Usually, the next point involves the child being saved by animals or poor, humble people. However, here the similarities pause, for Cuchulainn is not left to die by his parents and adopted by commoners, but well taken care of by his mother and uncle, later to be taught by all the best men of Ulster, and he does not seek revenge on his father or a father-figure. Even as a young child, Cuchulainn knows that the life he has seen so far is not what he is destined for and leaves to search for his identity as soon as he can. The following series of stories illustrate Cuchulainn's remarkable boyhood deeds.

## **Boyhood Deeds of Cuchulainn**

### **Setanta goes to Emain Macha**

When Setanta reached seven years of age, he heard his mother's guests speak of Emain Macha and decided he wanted to go there. He asked Dechtire if he could go, but she said he could when he was older. Setanta insisted he was ready now, but again

Dechtire told him to wait until she could send him with someone. Setanta thought that would be too long and asked where Emain Macha was located. His mother told him, and Setanta set off on his own, with only a hurling stick, his ball, and his spear. To pass the time, he would hit the ball with the stick, throwing the stick after it, and the spear after that, and then run ahead to catch them before they hit the ground. In this way, he quickly came to Emain Macha.

The first thing he saw was a group of boys playing a game. He ran to join them, and when he got the ball, he ran until he scored a goal. The other boys were very upset for Setanta had not asked their permission to join and been granted their protection, as was customary. All of the boy troop attacked him, but he escaped them and was fighting off the one-hundred-fifty boys single-handedly when Fergus came out of the castle.

Impressed by Setanta's defense, Fergus took him to Conchubar. Setanta told the king it was the other boys' fault for they did not welcome him as a stranger should be welcomed. Conchubar explained that it is proper for one to ask permission before joining the boy troop, and asked the boy his name. When Setanta told him who his mother was, Conchubar was delighted to see his nephew and took him out to the boys' playing field. There he introduced him and asked the boys to let him join them. The boy troop agreed, but as they were playing, Setanta began to fight them all. Conchubar asked him what he wanted, and he said that he would not quit until each of them agreed to be under his protection also. They agreed, and Setanta lived at Emain Macha and was taught by the best men in Ulster.

## **Setanta and the Hound of Culann**

One day not long after Setanta came to Emain Macha, Culann the smith invited the king to a feast at his house. When Conchubar was ready to leave, he called for Setanta, but the boy wanted to finish his game with the boy troop and said that he would follow when they were finished. Conchubar went ahead, and by the time he reached the smith's house he had forgotten his young nephew. He assured Culann that no one else was expected, and Culann locked the gates and let out his guard dog – the fiercest, strongest hound in Ulster.

As Setanta came along, hitting his ball, throwing his stick after it, and catching them, as he was accustomed to, the vicious hound heard him and ran toward him growling and barking, ready to eat him up in one bite. Setanta hit his ball toward the hound so hard that it went into his throat and straight through his body. Setanta lifted the huge animal and dashed him against a rock until he was dead.

Conchubar, hearing the commotion, suddenly remembered his young nephew and cried that surely the boy was killed by the hound. All the men were terrified for the boy and ran out to the yard, jumping over fences and climbing walls to reach him, and were overjoyed to see Setanta alive and well. Culann, though, was full of grief, for his fierce hound was the only protection for his home, his livestock, and his family. His flocks and herds would be killed or stolen and he was afraid for the safety of his wife and children, he said.

Setanta spoke up and told the smith not to worry and that he himself would take the place of the animal he killed. He would serve as guard dog for all the man's affairs



until another could be found, and he would train the replacement himself. All decided that was a fair offer, and Culann agreed.

Cathbad the Druid then told Setanta that from that day on he would be known as Cuchulainn, the Hound of Culann. Setanta said he was pleased with his own name, but Cathbad told him that someday the name of Cuchulainn would be known by all the world. The boy took the name then, and was thereafter known as Cuchulainn.

### **Cuchulainn Takes up Arms**

Cuchulainn was playing outside when he overheard Cathbad the Druid tell his students that whoever took up arms on that day, his would be greater than any name in Ireland, but his life would be short. Cuchulainn raced to his uncle and told him that he wanted to take up arms that day. Conchubar asked him where he got an idea like that, and Cuchulainn told him it was from Cathbad the Druid. Since the king trusted the druid, he allowed Cuchulainn to take up arms.

The boy tried all the weapons in the castle, but he was too strong for them. He tried all the spears, all the swords, all the shields, but they “broke like toys.”<sup>26</sup> None could match him in strength but the king’s own weapons. So the king gave him his own spear, sword, and shield. About that time, Cathbad came by and asked the king if the young boy was taking up arms today. Conchubar said yes, and asked him was he not the one to suggest it to the boy in the first place. Cathbad answered no, and Conchubar was upset that Cuchulainn lied to him. But the boy said he did not lie at all, but that it was

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<sup>26</sup> Anne Ross, *Druids, Gods, and Heroes from Celtic Mythology* (New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1986) 36.

Cathbad that put the idea in his head when he told his students that whoever took up arms today would have the greatest name in Ireland. Though they were sad, the druid Cathbad had to agree with his prediction, and the king could not take back his word. Cuchulainn stated that he did not care about the length of his life if only his name would live on forever.

Resolutely, Cuchulainn tested out the chariots. Again, he was too strong for them and broke them all until he tried the king's chariot and the king's horses. Cuchulainn insisted on going out into the countryside with Ibar mac Riangabra, the king's own charioteer, to see the boy troop so that they could all congratulate him. They did so, but were sad that he would no longer be playing with them. Cuchulainn and Ibar continued out to the watcher's ford, where one champion of Ulster always kept guard. They stopped to talk to Conall Cearnach, and when Conall would not relieve his post to Cuchulainn, the boy said he would then go and look for a fight. Conall felt responsible for him and tried to follow, but Cuchulainn aimed his sling and broke the wheel of Conall's chariot, guaranteeing that the man would not be able to stop him.

Cuchulainn made Ibar take him to the mountain Slieve Mourne, and they came to the home of the three sons of Nechtan, enemies of Ulster. Cuchulainn determined he would fight them as his first act as a warrior. To get their attention, he defiantly uprooted a gigantic stone half-buried in the ground which issued a warning for anyone trespassing on the sons' land and hurled it into a lake. The eldest came to see what the disturbance was, and Cuchulainn challenged him and demanded that the man get his weapons, for it was dishonorable to fight an unarmed man. Ibar warned Cuchulainn that this man could not be "pierced by a sword or spear," so the boy threw "an iron ball at his forehead and

killed the man.”<sup>27</sup> The second son came out, and after he returned with his weapons, Cuchulainn slew him with one thrust of his sword. The youngest rushed out for his revenge and told the boy they would fight in the river, where Cuchulainn bested and drowned him easily. After Cuchulainn killed the huge warriors one at a time, he brought their heads back to Emain Macha.

As Cuchulainn and Ibar raced back, the boy saw two wild stags, outran them, and tied them to the chariot. Next, he spotted a flock of twenty-four swans flying in the sky. Ibar agreed that it would be much more impressive to take the swans home alive, so the boy brought down each of them without killing one and tied them to the chariot before they revived. In this way, Cuchulainn returned to Emain Macha a warrior, with the three heads hanging from the chariot, the stags running behind, and the swans flying above.

When danger is impending and impossible feats need accomplished, Cuchulainn’s “battle frenzy” comes upon him, transforming his body and bringing an uncontrollable fury. “His body revolves within his skin, his hair stands up stiff with as it were a spark of fire on the tip of every strand, one eye becomes as small as the eye of a needle and the other monstrously large, his mouth is distended as far as his ears, and the ‘warrior’s light’ arises from the crown of his head.”<sup>28</sup> This warrior’s light, or hero’s light, does not distinguish between friend and foe, so that when young Cuchulainn came raging back to Emain Macha with his trophies and still in the throws of “battle frenzy,” the people had to distract him, grab him, and dunk him into three vats of water, each increasingly cooling his temper.

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<sup>27</sup> Marie Heaney, *Over Nine Waves* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994) 86.

<sup>28</sup> MacCana, *Celtic Mythology*, 105.

These stories set the scene for Cuchulainn's glorious, adventurous life as a warrior for Ulster. Accomplishing amazing feats and showing godlike strength at such a young age is important for a hero, as we see in many hero myths, including the story of Hercules killing the two serpents that Hera sent to murder him. This can also be seen in the life of Fionn, another Irish character. While still a young child, Fionn wandered across a group of boys playing a game and joined them, much as Cuchulainn did. Fionn overpowered them all individually, and, day after day, he returned and defeated larger numbers of them, but even fighting all of them at once he never found a match for his strength and skill among them.<sup>29</sup>

Myths often demonstrate the values of their culture. Besides being strong and brave, ancient Celtic culture showed their heroes acting defiant of the rules of society, as Cuchulainn ignored the accepted standard age for becoming a warrior. That act also showed ambition and the desire for fame. Since fame was one of the few things a warrior could depend on in his life, one would boast about his accomplishments, spread the news of his victories, and ensure that his name was well-known. Cuchulainn proved himself to be headstrong when he left for Emain Macha alone; aggressive in how he reacted to the boy troop and challenged the sons of Nectar to battle; and determined when he refused to back down from the fights. He showed bravery in facing the hound of Culann, and cunning and quick-thinking when he killed the eldest son of Nectar with the iron ball. As he grew, these attributes and more made him very attractive to the women of Ulster, and especially to Emer.

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<sup>29</sup> Ross, *Druids, Gods, and Heroes*, 56.

## The Marriage of Cuchulainn (or “The Wooing of Emer”)

Cuchulainn possessed such charm and talent, beauty and skill that all the women of Emain Macha loved him. The men were not pleased, they did not like seeing their wives and daughters always watching him. They decided it was time to find a wife for Cuchulainn. Conchubar sent nine men throughout Ireland to search for a suitable match, but Cuchulainn would not take just any wife. He loved Emer, daughter of Forgall Manach, the most beautiful and most intelligent girl in the land, for she possessed many gifts and was “his equal in age, in appearance, and in race, in skill and handiness.”<sup>30</sup>

After a year of searching, the messengers came back without success, and Cuchulainn took his chariot to the house of Forgall. When he found Emer and her companions outside, he stopped to talk to her. None of her companions, or Cuchulainn’s charioteer could understand what they said to each other, for they spoke in riddles. This was so that the girls could not relay their conversation to her father. He had witnessed Cuchulainn’s warrior mode and was frightened of him. Cuchulainn professed his intentions to Emer, and she gave him certain tasks which must be accomplished before she would consent to marriage.

Cuchulainn returned to Emain Macha, and Forgall, who had heard of Cuchulainn’s visit, followed him, dressed as a foreigner. Conchubar welcomed him, and Forgall praised his hospitality, his wealth, and the men of Ulster, and Cuchulainn the highest of them. He said that if only Cuchulainn were to go to Alban and study under Scathach, the legendary woman-warrior, he would be the ultimate warrior.

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<sup>30</sup> Augusta Gregory, *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (New York: Oxford University, 1933) 36.

Cuchulainn took the challenge and agreed to search out Scathach. Accompanied by Conall Cearnach and Laegaire Buadach, he stopped to visit Emer. When she heard about the stranger, she knew what her father had done and explained to him that Forgall did not expect him to return. Cuchulainn promised her he would, and they vowed to wait for each other.

The three men set out, but Conall and Laegaire grew homesick and soon turned back. Cuchulainn continued the trip alone. When he could no longer find his way, a “great terrible beast like a lion” appeared, but did not harm him.<sup>31</sup> Cuchulainn jumped on its back and the beast carried him for four days until coming to an island and then left Cuchulainn alone. Cuchulainn soon found people who had heard of him, gave him food and drink, and told him where to go. He followed their directions and found a group of Scathach’s scholars. Among them were friends from Ireland, including Ferdia, and they welcomed each other.

After greetings, they told him that one must cross the bridge to get to Scathach’s island, but a man must prove himself a champion in order to cross, for the bridge would change shape and size in a different way each time one tried to step on it. After Cuchulainn tried four times without success, the men were all laughing at him for thinking that one as young as he would be able to accomplish such a feat. He became angry, and his warrior frenzy came upon him, and he made the “hero’s salmon leap” over half the bridge and was over the next half before the bridge could change.<sup>32</sup>

He stood then before Scathach’s house, and watching him from the window was Uathach, Scathach’s daughter, who instantly loved him. Cuchulainn threw his spear

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<sup>31</sup> Gregory, *Cuchulainn*, 43.

<sup>32</sup> Gregory, *Cuchulainn*, 44.

through the door, shaft first. Uathach came out to him, told him where to find her mother, and what he should do to get her to agree to teach him. Cuchulainn did as he was told, finding Scathach training her two sons and holding his sword to her throat until she agreed to “teach him all her own skill in arms.”<sup>33</sup> She promised she would.

In Ulster, Forgall had heard that a great king, Lugaid, was searching for a wife. He eagerly went to Emain and promised Emer’s hand in marriage. But when Emer was presented to Lugaid, she told him of her vow to Cuchulainn, and he was afraid and returned home.

Cuchulainn had spent much time with Scathach when a war broke out between herself and her rival, Aoife. Scathach gave Cuchulainn a drink to put him to sleep so that he would not fight and get hurt. The drink did not last long on him, though, and he followed the armies, fighting and defeating many of Aoife’s best warriors on the way.

When Aoife saw this, she challenged Scathach to a fight between the two of them. Cuchulainn went instead, after asking what Aoife cared most about in the world, and Scathach told him it was her horses, chariot, and charioteer. Cuchulainn went to face Aoife, and she had broken both his spear and his sword when he cried out that her horses, chariot, and charioteer had fallen into a valley. She looked, and Cuchulainn grabbed her and put his sword to her breast, but released her when she begged for her life. Aoife made peace with Scathach then, and she, too, loved Cuchulainn.

Cuchulainn stayed with Scathach until she taught him all she knew, and he prepared to return to Ireland. Scathach told him what she saw in his future, that he would have to fight great armies alone, and that his life would not be long and he would die in full strength. He left then on a ship, along with Ferdia and other friends, and when he

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<sup>33</sup> Gregory, *Cuchulainn*, 45.

arrived in Ireland, he went directly to Emer to take her from her father. Forgall had heard of his return, though, and kept Emer inside the palace and the palace so heavily guarded that Cuchulainn caught not even a glimpse of her for one year.

Finally, Cuchulainn made his chariot ready and went against Forgall's defenses. He performed his hero's salmon leap over the walls where he was attacked by and fought three groups of nine men, saving one man from each group, the three being Emer's brothers. Forgall was so afraid that he ran and leaped over the wall, falling to his death. Cuchulainn found and carried away Emer, her foster-sister, Fial, and their weight in two bags of gold and silver.<sup>34</sup> As he was running, the army followed, and he fought and killed one-hundred men at each ford they passed. Finally, Cuchulainn had rescued Emer, and in doing so completed all the tasks she set when they first met. Cuchulainn took Emer to her new home in Emain Macha where they were married.

Spence's pattern states that the hero defeats a monster and then marries a princess. This has become the most common standard of myths, legends, and fairy tales. In Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*, Prince Phillip must slay the evil Maleficent in her dragon form before can he rescue and marry the Princess Aurora. In the case of Cuchulainn, no one specific monster exists, but he must become a worthy warrior. As we have seen, he proved this to Emer and to society before taking her as his wife. Emer may not be a princess, but she serves as the utmost object of the hero's affection, the goal of his actions, and she is widely known as talented, smart, wealthy, and beautiful – as much as any princess could hope to be. Here we have seen the pattern resume as Cuchulainn courts and marries Emer. In Cuchulainn's attempts to win Emer, we see further examples

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<sup>34</sup> Ross, *Druids, Gods, and Heroes*, 41.



of his strength, determination, cleverness, and bravery, all of which he confirms in the episodes of his warrior deeds, such as the Feast of Bricriu and the Táin Bo Cuailnge.

## **The Feast of Bricriu**

Bricriu Poison-Tongue was conjuring mischief as usual when he held a feast and invited Cuchulainn, Conall, and Laoghaire, telling each that he would receive the Champion's Portion, for Bricriu loved dissension and malice. When the three warriors all tried to claim the best of the meat for dinner, an argument broke out among them. In order to end the fight, the druid Cu Roi disguised himself as a giant and entered the hall issuing a challenge to any champion who would make a pact and keep his word. King Conchobar mac Nessa promised his men would keep their word.

The giant's proposal was this: a man could cut off his head this night, if he would let the giant cut off his the next. To uphold the reputation of Ulster, Laoghaire shouted that he would accept the giant's challenge. He met the giant, who bent down, and with one swing, he took off the giant's head. It went flying through the hall and rolled onto the floor, from where the giant retrieved it and left the hall. The next day, the giant returned, but Laoghaire was not in the hall. He issued the challenge again, and Conall accepted it. He took one swing and the giant's head came off. Again, the giant picked up his head and left. The third night, he returned, but Conall was not there. He issued the challenge again, this time for Cuchulainn. The warrior wanted no pact, but angrily attacked the giant, and not only cut off his head, but beat and smashed it. The giant retrieved it and left the hall. The next night, he returned and called for Cuchulainn. This time, the

warrior stood up and answered. He went to the giant, asked that he kill him quickly, and bent down. The giant swung, but brought down his ax so lightly that it barely nicked the skin. The giant ordered Cuchulainn to stand up and told him that for his honesty, he would always receive the Champion's Portion. He then revealed himself as Cu Roi and left the banquet hall.

This tale bears a striking resemblance to the Arthurian legend of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Both tales attest to the fact that courage, integrity, and honor are important to these societies, and especially so in their heroes. Cuchulainn will need all of these traits as he fights the ultimate battle of his life.

### **Táin Bo Cuailnge (or “The Cattle Raid of Cooley”)**

This tale began with Ailill and Medb. King Ailill of Leinster and his wife, Queen Medb of Connaught, a queen in her own right, lay in bed one night engaging in “pillow talk” and comparing their possessions. They found they were equal in everything. Except one thing – Ailill owned a magnificent white-horned bull, with which Medb had nothing that could compare. Medb refused to be less than her husband in any way and determined to secure for herself the famed Brown Bull of Cooley, which belonged to Daire in Ulster.

Medb sent men to attain the animal and Daire agreed to let her borrow it. But then, he overheard one of the Medb's men boast that if he had not agreed, they would have taken the bull from him by force. Though it was not true, Daire was insulted and refused to let them have the Brown. This angered Medb, and she gathered and led her

army to raid Ulster and steal the bull. Due to an incapacitating curse that had been put on the men of Ulster years before, they were tormented with birth pangs whenever danger threatened Ulster. Medb knew of this curse and waited until all the men were debilitated to make her attack. Cuchulainn, however, was too young to be under the spell, for he was only seventeen years of age, but already a great warrior, and went to fight the army single-handedly.<sup>35</sup>

Cuchulainn slew hundreds of Medb's men every day. He stood alone on the plain between Ulster and the enemy army, flew into his battle frenzy, contorting into a monstrous mass of anger, flames shooting out of his head, slaughtering and terrifying his confused adversaries before they could figure out what was happening to their comrades or which way to run from imminent demise. Cuchulainn also used his wits and, under the cover of darkness, surprised the army, killing one hundred men per night.

Medb realized that Cuchulainn was killing her warriors en masse so quickly that she must devise a plan. Cuchulainn suggested that he fight one of Medb's champions per day. While they were fighting, Medb's army could travel unhindered, but she must agree to stop for the day when Cuchulainn prevailed, and in return, Cuchulainn agreed not to attack her camps at night. After Cuchulainn successfully defeated champion after champion, Medb sent for the warrior Ferdia, the only warrior equal to Cuchulainn in bravery and skill.

Cuchulainn and Ferdia were close friends, for they had trained together under Scathach's tutorage, and were foster-brothers, the closest bond between warriors. But through flattery and trickery, Medb manipulated Ferdia into promising that he would fight Cuchulainn before he even knew who his opponent would be. When the two

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<sup>35</sup> Heaney, *Over Nine Waves*, 127.

warriors realized what Medb had devised, they were distraught as they understood this would be a fight to the death. However, both warriors had given their word that they would fight and could not renege on their promises, their honor would not allow it.

Though each was as willing to die as to kill the other, each was prepared to perform his duty when they arrived at the ford where they would fight. For three days they fought bitterly, equal in every way, and stopped at night, greeting each other as friends, sharing food and medicine. The fourth day, though, when both were increasingly tired and lacking in willingness to fight, Cuchulainn noticed that Ferdia was in no condition to do battle. Ferdia insisted on fighting, though, and once more the foster-brothers faced each other armed with their swords. As the day dragged on, they swung and pierced and hacked at each other, despising their situation, but knowing no other way. Finally, Cuchulainn had no choice but to take his spear and cast the deadly weapon. It found its mark, and Ferdia fell. Cuchulainn raced to him and held his friend's body, the stream red with the blood of both. There Ferdia died, in Cuchulainn's arms by Cuchulainn's hand.

In the end, Ulster pushed the invading army out, where the men dispersed to their own lands. The two bulls, the White-horned of Ailill and the Brown of Cooley, ignored in the chaos, fought between themselves. The Brown left little of the White-horned before he returned to Cooley, and when he arrived, he collapsed, "his heart burst in his body, and blood came bursting from his mouth, and he died."<sup>36</sup>

This tale and the Feast serve as prime examples of the hero facing challenges, fighting wars and returning triumphant, in accordance with the Hahn's pattern. One of the most famous examples of a hero undertaking and completing warrior deeds is

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<sup>36</sup> Gregory, *Cuchulainn*, 209.

Hercules' Twelve Labors. Those show Hercules at his best, strongest, and most amazing, just as the Cattle Raid shows Cuchulainn in his defeat of hundreds of men at a time for days on end.

Once again, Cuchulainn displays his bravery, cunning, and determination, along with another example of the supernatural strength he possesses when in his warrior mode, but we can also learn from this story other qualities the Celts deemed important. The Cattle Raid clearly expresses a warrior's strong bond to his word in Celtic society. This and other stories in the Táin provide a window to that culture, through which we see that raids between neighboring lands were a common occurrence. "The tána are the literary reflex of a social practice which was not merely Irish, but Celtic and Indo-European, and which is found elsewhere among cattle-rearing people."<sup>37</sup> Thus, we learn about one culture and are able to further our understanding of others by comparison. From this information we can understand why strength and courage were such admirable and important qualities to the ancient Irish.

Another side of Celtic culture that we see here is Medb's position in society. Firstly, the queen expects and demands to be equal to her husband, and secondly, she has the power to gather and command her own army. Medb is the one who makes the agreement with Cuchulainn, proving that she is indeed the leader of this endeavor. Also, the Cattle Raid clearly expresses a warrior's strong bond to his word in Celtic society, as Cuchulainn and Ferdia kept their word even when facing the most difficult opponent. Fame, courage, and honor stand higher than anything else in the world, including friendship and love, as we see once again in the final story of the saga of Cuchulainn.

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<sup>37</sup> J.P. Mallory, *Aspects of the Táin* (Belfast: December, 1992) 77.

## Death of Cuchulainn

In protecting Ulster, Cuchulainn had killed many men, and made enemies of their relatives. Medb wickedly joined all the men of Ireland, of Munster, Leinster, and Connaught, together to seek revenge on Cuchulainn. Conchubar, Cathbad, and Emer attempted to keep him from fighting the army on his own, to wait until the men of Ulster, once again under the Curse of Macha, could come to his aid. Niamh, a woman dear to Cuchulainn, made him swear to get her permission before he went to battle. He did promise this, and it was only this that kept him inside when the army came, shouting and screaming war cries, playing harps and drums. His enemies used powerful deceptions and sent him false visions to anger him and force him to fight. They even made him think that his home was burned and his wife murdered. Cathbad and Emer convinced him time after time that what he was seeing was not real. Though he was upset and ashamed that Ulster sat undefended, they asked him to wait just three days until the curse was over. But one of his enemies then disguised herself as Niamh, and gave him permission to answer his enemies' challenges.

Though he knew this meant his death, he could not cowardly ignore their call. He told Emer, "Fame outlives life!" as he went to face them.<sup>38</sup> On the way, Cuchulainn met the goddess Morríghan. She was the fearsome goddess of war and loved Cuchulainn. In disguise as a princess, she told him she had been helping him and could continue to do so, if he would accept her love. Cuchulainn told her he needed no help from a woman

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<sup>38</sup> Heaney, *Over Nine Waves*, 147.

and refused both her offers of help and her advances toward him. Extremely angry, she took the shape of a crow and flew off to join forces with Medb.<sup>39</sup>

Cuchulainn reached the enemy army carrying three powerful spears which would, according to prophecy, kill three kings in one day. His enemies were clever, though, and placed three druids among the warriors, and one could not refuse the request of a druid. When Cuchulainn approached, the first druid requested his spear or he would shame Cuchulainn's name. The warrior launched the spear, backwards, toward the druid, killing him and nine men with one throw. Lugaid picked it up and threw it back, and it struck down Laeg, Cuchulainn's charioteer – the king of charioteers. The second druid requested the next spear, threatening to shame the land of Ulster if Cuchulainn did not comply. The warrior hurled the second spear, again killing the druid and nine men. Erc grabbed the weapon, threw it, and it hit the Grey of Macha, Cuchulainn's horse – the king of horses. A third time, a druid demanded the last spear or he would curse the countrymen of Ulster. Cuchulainn loosed the last spear, killing the druid and nine men. Lugaid again took the spear and threw it. This spear gave a mortal wound to Cuchulainn – the king of warriors.

Refusing to be seen in such state, Cuchulainn pulls himself to a pillar, to which he tightly binds himself, so that he may die still fighting and standing. Frightened of the lingering hero glow, his enemies dared not approach him until days later a crow, the Morríghan in disguise, landed on his shoulder. Only then did they approach him to

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<sup>39</sup> Moyra Caldecott, *Women in Celtic Myth: Tales of Extraordinary Women from the Ancient Celtic Tradition* (Rochester; Destiny, 1992) 136-137.

confirm their victory. All of Ulster, the Red Branch warriors, the king, and Emer fiercely lament his death, and they give him a proper, honorable burial.<sup>40</sup>

Cuchulainn valiantly met his death when he reached twenty-seven years, thus fulfilling the prophecy he chose to take on himself when he was but seven, and the requirement of the hero dying young as stated by Hahn.<sup>41</sup> Because he refused the Morríghan, Cuchulainn lost favor with the gods, a point found in Spence's pattern. Tantalus of Greek mythology also met his death and punishment after angering the gods. This son of Zeus cut up, cooked, and fed his own son Pelops to the gods for dinner. When they realized what he had done, they sentenced him to Hades where fruit and water would always be temptingly just out of his reach.<sup>42</sup> While Tantalus' crime seems worse than Cuchulainn's refusal for the Morríghan's help, we can still determine that it is the gods who are in power, and one is punished for angering them, in Celtic culture and others. During his time on earth, it is not only his extraordinary strength that names Cuchulainn a hero, but also his ambition, confidence, and courage. His desire to receive everlasting fame, protect the land and people of Ulster to all ends, and fulfill his obligations and promises make him a worthy hero of the Ulster cycle.

## Discussion of Literary Sources Past and Present

These tales of Cuchulainn were collected from a myriad of sources over a long period of time, collaged in my mind, and have come out as a menagerie. Along with

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<sup>40</sup> Gregory, *Cuchulainn*, 262.

<sup>41</sup> Heaney, *Over Nine Waves*, 141.

<sup>42</sup> Morford, *Classical Mythology*, 373-377.



books such as Lady Augusta Gregory's *Cuchulainn of Muirthemne* and Maria Heaney's *Over Nine Waves*, I have incorporated information from other books I have read in the past, stories that I heard in Ireland, and information from an Irish Folktale class, among other sources, in order to write the tales. Though Celtic may not be the most prominent and well-known type of mythology, it is still prevalent in our society today, as one can see from all the sources available to learn about it. Considering that the tales of the Ulster Cycle date back to before the time of Christ, it is astonishing that such a wealth of information about this character survives.

Though one-hundred years ago, when authors such as William Butler Yeats and Lady Gregory were writing their poems or stories of Cuchulainn, may seem a long time, it is yesterday compared to the time that these tales found an origin. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a resurgence of interest in literature and arts in Ireland resulted in the Irish Literature Renaissance. This was primarily led by Yeats and Gregory, though the whole country was involved. While Gregory used her resources as a rich widow to travel and gather tales of Cuchulainn, Fionn, and other Irish characters and wrote marvelous, large anthologies of them, Yeats was being inspired by the same stories. In his lifetime, he wrote five plays centering on Cuchulainn and copious quantities of poems about Irish subjects such as Celtic mythology characters, the Tuatha de Danaan, the faerie folk, and the Irish countryside. "Yeats extolled the ancient sagas as heroic and tragic and praised them for illustrating the passionate Celtic character."<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, "Yeats' elevated notion of ancient Irish literature as a repository of idealism and imagination was far from accepted, even in Ireland."<sup>44</sup> Though the ancient

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<sup>43</sup> Mary Helen Thuente, *W.B. Yeats and Irish Folklore* (Totowa; Gill and Macmillan, 1980) 8.

<sup>44</sup> Thuente, *W.B. Yeats*, 8.

myths were unpopular in Ireland at the time, Yeats did not give up and, apparently, the tales were still remembered and told to some extent. “When Yeats began to use an Irish subject matter in his own poetry of the 1880’s, the oral traditions of the peasantry had a more immediate influence on his work than the manuscript tradition of ancient Irish myth did.”<sup>45</sup>

Those manuscripts provide an explanation as to how the peasantry knew the legends as it is at least partially due to their existence and survival that anyone knows them. Thankfully, Irish monks deemed it important to copy texts such as the Book of the Dun Cow, circa 1100 A.D., and the Book of Leinster, circa 1150 A.D., which included the Cattle Raid of Cooley and other legends, and to protect them from the attacks of the Vikings, who the monks feared would damage Irish monasteries and their possessions. These books held compilations of history, Irish folktales, Celtic mythology, and a wealth of other information. The most famous one, the Book of Kells, circa 800 A.D., held Latin translations of the four gospels, was taken from Iona to Kells for safe-keeping, and now is safely on display in Trinity College Dublin for millions of people to appreciate. Though these stories went in and out of fashion, there has always been and always will be an indefinable fascination in them that never lets them die and will forever keep them in the mind of people who have heard and enjoyed these tales.

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<sup>45</sup> Thuermer, *W.B. Yeats*, 24.

## Conclusion

We have seen how these Celtic stories have survived through the centuries, and though they may not be as prevalent in our society as Greek or Roman mythologies, they are important as guides to that particular culture. For example, we know that strength, bravery, determination, intelligence, honor, and fame are among the qualities the Celts held most highly. In acting as guides for individual societies, differing mythologies simultaneously overflow with unique information and possess astounding similarities to each other. As previously discussed, by observing Cuchulainn we have learned about Celtic society and the attributes it esteemed and have seen examples of the connections between him and other heroes. After examining the given patterns, we see that the lives of heroes all around the world show parallels to each other. Morford and Lenardon state that “the variety of traditional tales is matched by the variety of their origins and significance,” and yet it has been clearly proven that the similarities are universal.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Morford, *Classical Mythology*, 3.

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